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ABSTRACT

To understand how university students view writing centers, writing consultants, and themselves as writers, a study was conducted at the Syracuse University Writing Consultation Center (New York). The Center provides a free consultation service based on the peer conferencing model of collaborative learning. Sixty students who participated in the study completed questionnaires, both before and after consulting with a writing center staff member. They answered questions about how comfortable they were before and during the consultation, how they assessed their writing ability, and whether the consultation met with their expectations. In-depth interviews with frequent users of the center were also conducted. Results suggested that few clients viewed themselves as very good writers, and most described themselves as below average. Some were anxious about the conference process, but most found the consultant interested, helpful, and encouraging. A majority expected to return for another consultation. Interviews with three students--a pre-med major, a master's student in education, and a psychology major in a division for nontraditional students--suggested that clients adopt the strategies modeled in their conferences, and that they feel they are becoming better writers. (JC)

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Client Perceptions of a University Writing Center

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During the past decade, there has been a rapid growth of writing centers - places for working with writers outside the classroom. In his article, Writing Center Research: Testing Our Assumptions Stephen North states that " the speed of this growth has enabled writing center staffs to do little more than survive, to do what they can to improve the lots of their charges, leaving precious little time, money, or research into the hows and whys of their operations. North divides the limited writing center research into three types: 1) practioners' reflections on their experiences, 2) speculations on theory to explain writing center events and to develop practices, 3) surveys which describe centers and clients in terms of "counting"or " enumeration". In the Idea of a Writing Center, North argues that if we are ever to demonstrate the value of the writing center, we must examine the dynamics of the writing conference itself.

Because this area has not been thoroughly investigated, the members of our university writing center have been examining the events of writing conferences, clients' and consultants' perceptions of these events, and how the events and perceptions provide information about the composing process. Within this panel, we are reporting on three areas of our research: Clients' Perceptions of a University Writing Center; The Consultant Role: Styles, Strategies and Methods; and Portrait of a Long Term Client Consultant Relationship.

WRITING CENTER

These studies were conducted in the Syracuse University Writing Consultation Center. The Department of Reading and

Language Arts sponsors the center which is housed in the School of Education. 22 school of education graduate students staff the center and participate in training meetings throughout the semester. The center is a free service, open 20 hours a week. Writers may make appointments or drop in for conferences. "We work with any writer, on any type of writing, at any stage in the writing " (Writing Center Flier). Sessions are based on the "peer conferencing model of collaborative learning "(Johnson & Gentile, 1987). "Consultants react, reflect, or question. We don't edit, offer writing instruction or read the minds of professors or publishers. Our aim is to work with the writer, not just the writing " (Writing Center Flier).

CLIENT PERCEPTIONS

Client perceptions were examined in two ways: through a brief questionnaire and through interviews. The questionnaires were used to assess the clients' attitudes before and after their first writing conference. The interviews were used to collect the view-points of clients who had completed three or more conferences.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Center staff designed a brief questionnaire to examine the comfort level, expectations, and self image of the writers, the helpfulness of the session, and the clients' plans for additional conferences. Three questions were completed before the session, three after. The questionnaires were answered by circling a number or a word. The questionnaires were completed by 60 students.

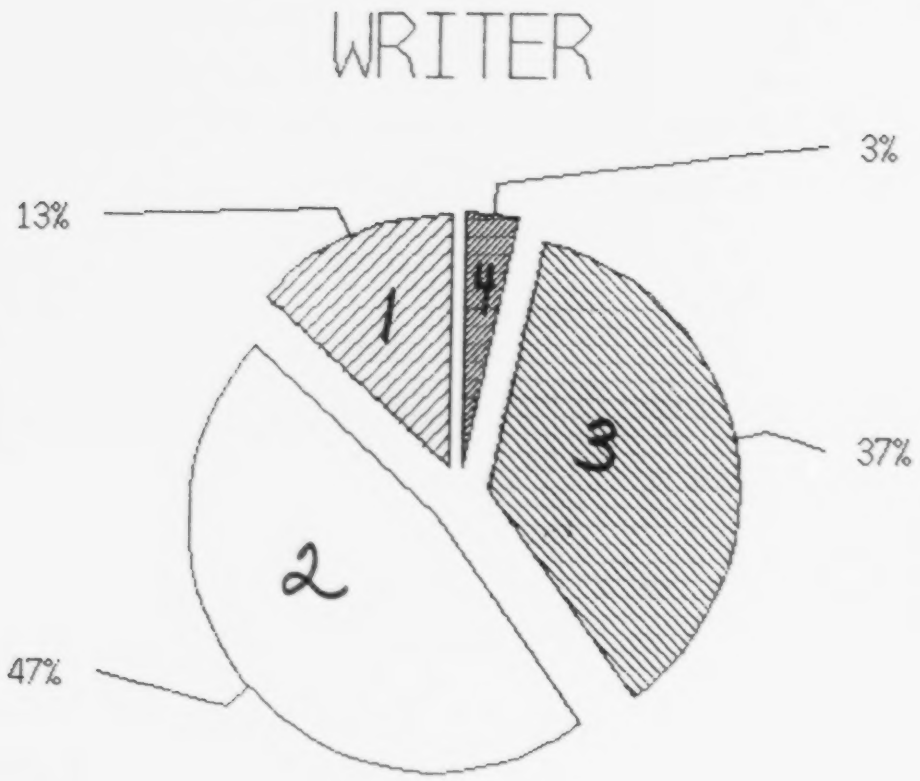
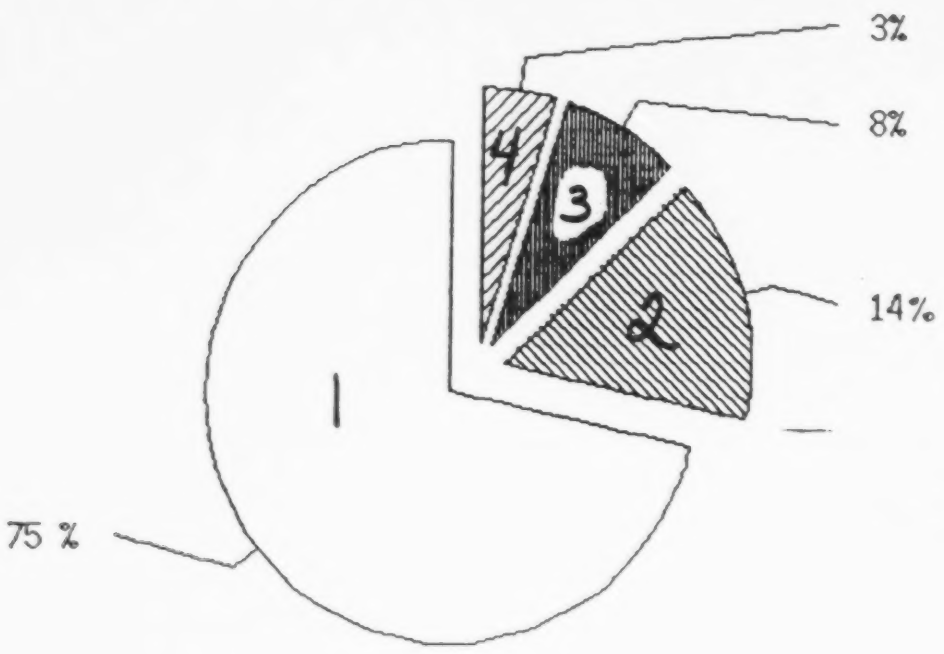


FIGURE 1

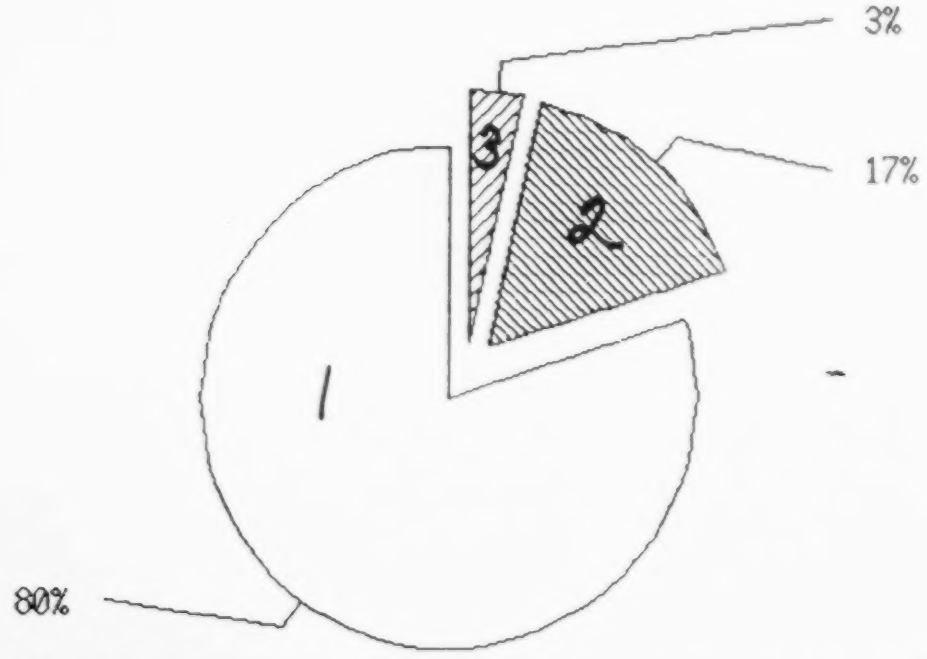
PRE SESSION COMFORT



1-comfortable 4-uncomfortable

FIGURE 2

POST SESSION COMFORT



1-comfortable 4-uncomfortable

FIGURE 3

EXPECTATIONS

1- closely
4- not at all

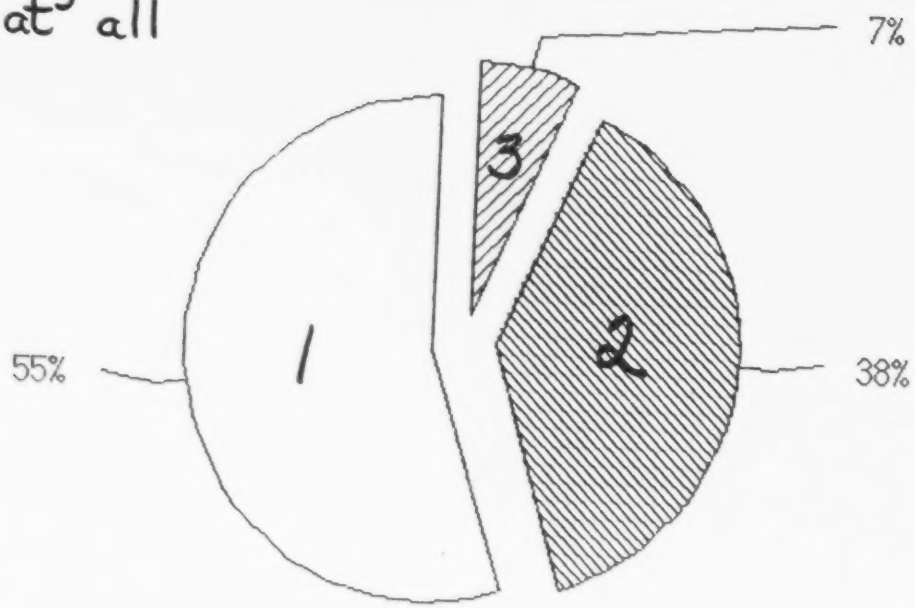


FIGURE 4

HELPFUL

1- helpful
4- not at all helpful

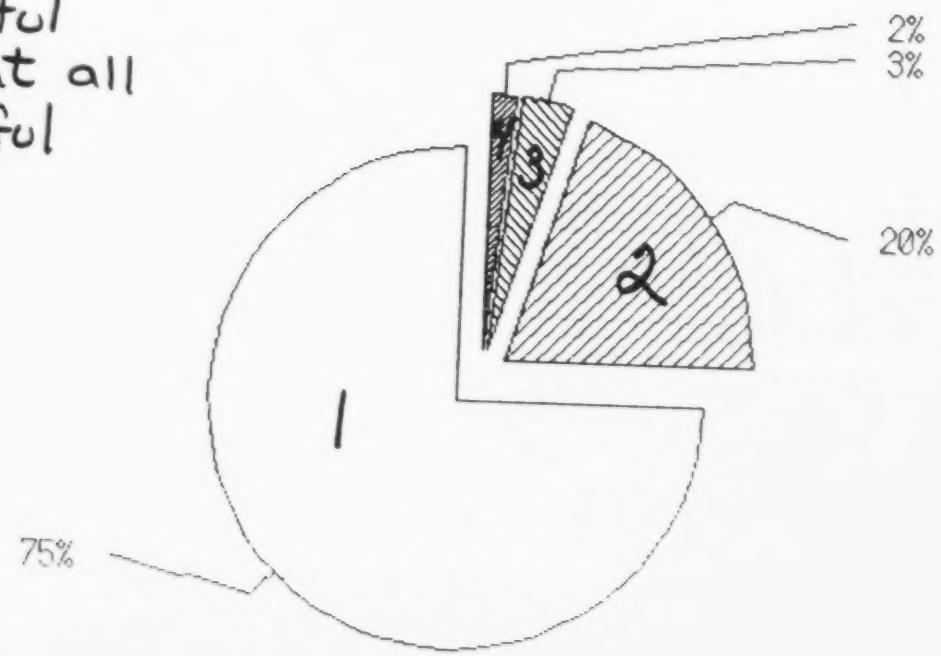


FIGURE 5

CLIENT PERCEPTIONS

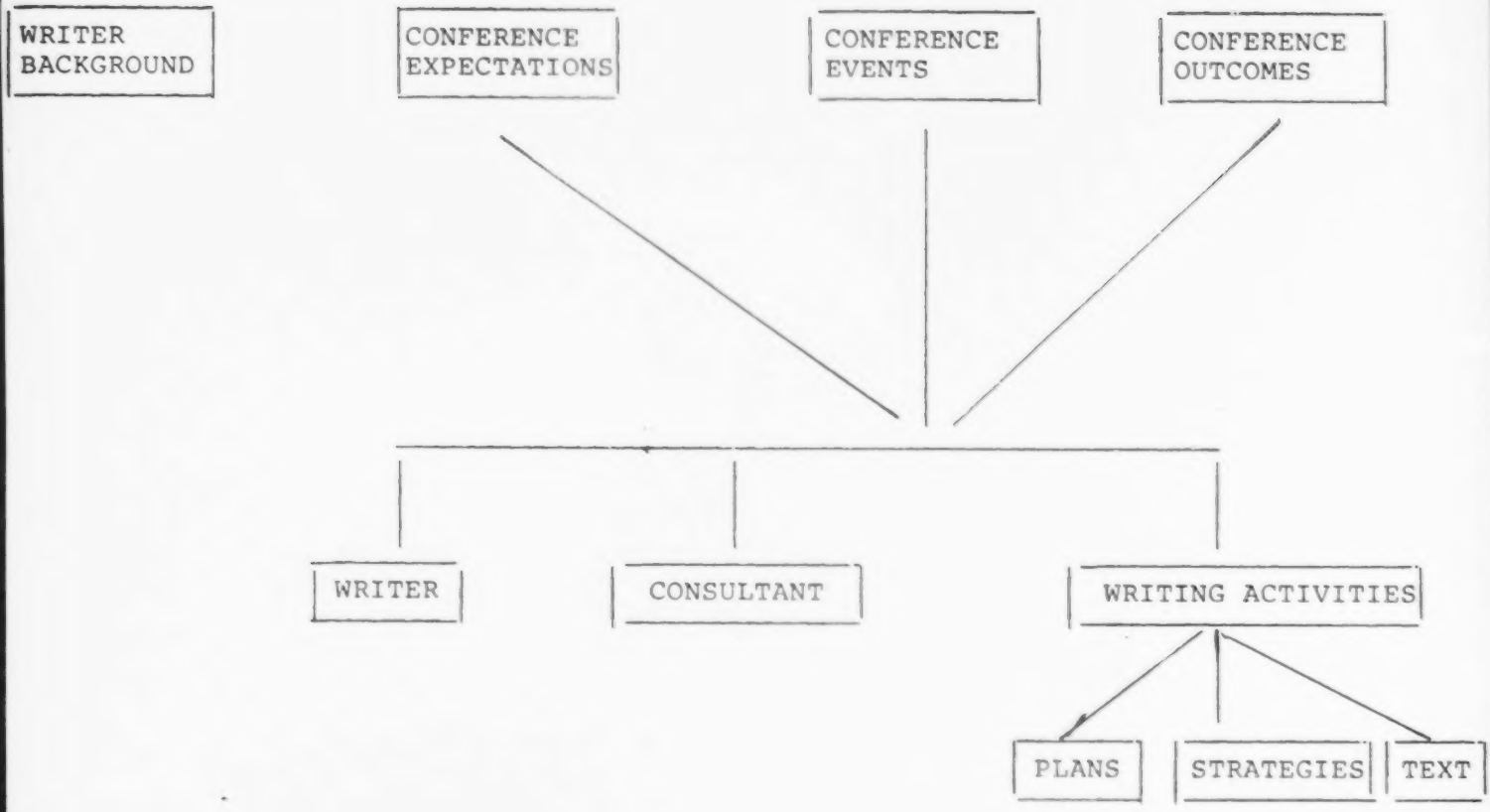


FIGURE 6

Figure 1 shows the response to the pre-session question which asked clients to rate themselves as writers on a scale of 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent).(See Figure 1.) 60 % of the clients rated themselves as 1 or 2, the poor writer end of the scale. 37% ranked themselves as 3, better writers, and 3 % as excellent writers. In response to to the question "Do you expect to return for another session?" 88% answered yes; 12% no. Figure 2 indicates the client level of comfort about coming to the center. A high number of clients (89%) responded with a 1 or 2 (the more comfortable end of the scale). (See Figure 2.)

Figure 3 shows the responses to the post session question, "How comfortable were you in the session?" (See Figure 3.) 97 % rated themselves as 1 or 2 (the comfortable end of the scale). No clients rated themselves as 4 or the uncomfortable end of the the scale. These results indicate that some clients may have been more comfortable in a session than they expected to be. In terms of their expectations for a conference, Figure 4 shows that 55 % of the clients felt that the conference closely met their expectations (response 1). 93 % felt that the conference met many of their expectations, response 1 and 2. 7% felt that some expectations were not met, and no client reported a 4 or a "not at all" response. Figure 5 shows how helpful the clients found the session. 95 % rated the session as 1 or 2, the helpful end of the scale); 3% as less than helpful; 2% as 4 (not at all helpful). Based upon the responses to these questionnaires, over 85% of clients initially viewed the writing center as a comfortable place. They

felt that the conference had been helpful and had met most of their expectations. Slightly over half the clients viewed themselves as below average writers.

INTERVIEWS

In depth interviews with more frequent users of the center provide a more detailed picture of how clients perceived the writing center. Clients who had completed at least 3 writing conferences were asked to participate in interviews. From those interviews, I selected three writers, who I feel represent the variety of academic interests and levels of writers who use the center.

I will illustrate client perceptions of the center through brief sketches of these three writers. Each sketch will include information about the writer's academic background, and their expectaions for, events of, and outcomes of their writing conference activities. (See Figure 6.) Conference events are described in three major categories; 1) the writer, 2) the consultant, 3) the writing activities which include plans (what the writer will do next), strategies (how the writer solves problems), and texts (problems and changes in written work).

(Client names have been changed, and all words in capital letters are direct quotes from interview transcripts.)

CLIENT 1 - AYESHA

BACKGROUND

Ayesha is a pre-med major in the college of arts and sciences. At the time of the interview, she was a full time sophomore with courses in biology, psychology, math, English, and education. She

found out about the center from her English and education instructors. Prior to the interview, Ayesha had participated in 3 writing conferences.

EXPECTATIONS

Initially, Ayesha had expected to pay for the conference and did not expect to be videotaped. She felt that she NEEDS HELP WITH HER WRITING but she liked to write because she can express WHAT I FEEL AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME and WHY THINGS ARE THE WAY THEY ARE. All of her writing since eighth grade has been saved and is shared with her daughter.

For Ayesha, the consultant was going to be a TUTOR and work to help her revise according to the teacher comments written on her text. In terms of writing activities, Ayesha's routine strategy was to gather information and develop A KIND OF OUTLINE. In her text, she anticipated problems with organization, the summary, specific details, and grammar.

EVENTS

During the conference events, Ayesha realized that by reading aloud and by being read to I CAN NOTICE A LOT OF THINGS THAT DON'T SOUND RIGHT OR THAT COULD BE BETTER. The consultant listened, jotted down notes, and read portions of the text aloud. The consultant HELPED YOU WITH WHATEVER YOUR PROBLEMS ARE, AT THAT TIME. Writing activities included the writer planning WHEN AND IF YOU RETURN TO THE CENTER. Ayesha compared this planning to a writing tutoring program in which YOU WERE RESTRICTED TO BE THERE, WHETHER OR NOT YOU NEED TO BE. Strategies used during the sessions were the reading aloud of portions of the text to hear problems in sense,

structure, and general flow. She discussed possible text changes with the consultant. The focus on the text was on the problems identified through reading and discussion. Ayesha compared these writing activities to a writing tutoring program in which students and tutors could not make changes in a text until after the teacher had read and commented on the paper. About that experience she felt that SO WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN IS THAT YOU'RE GOING TO GET AN F AND THEN GO BACK TO TUTORING AND THEY'RE GOING TO SAY,OK NOW IF YOU DO THE REWRITE, IT WILL HELP YOU IN YOUR GRADE. SO I DON'T FEEL THAT'S WORTH IT. THE WRITING CENTER IS NOT LIKE THAT.

OUTCOMES

Ayesha described the conference experience as REALLY BETTER THAN I EXPECTED and as VERY HELPFUL. She also felt that I CAN HANDLE IT. (her writing). For her,the consultant has become one who reads her writing and HELS WITH WHATEVER THE PROBLEM IS. In terms of her writing activities, Ayesha had 4 additional conferences and also recommended the center to her friends. She has adopted the strategy of reading a text to herself. She uses this with all her writing. She has begun to let other people read papers before the final draft so SOMEONE ELSE CAN SEE WHAT YOU DON'T SEE. As for her text changes, she says the ideas, wording, and grammar are better. I FEEL LIKE THE WRITING IS REALLY BETTER - I CAN SEE IT IN MY GRADES.

CLIENT 2 - EVELYN

BACKGROUND

Evelyn, a full time master's student, is an elementary ed - ucation major. Her courses include science and social science

methods, teacher development, and student teaching. Two professors in the education program referred Evelyn to the center because of her marginal performance on a departmental writing competency test. Her language arts professor made her initial appointment at the center. He went with her to the first conference to introduce her to the consultant. Although Evelyn did not feel required to attend conferences, she was certain that she could not pass the competency without additonal assistance. At the time of the interview, she had completed 5 conferences.

EXPECTATIONS

Evelyn did not know what to expect from a conference. I WAS UN-CONFIDENT .. NERVOUS.. APPREHENSIVE. She didn't realize she had SUCH A PROBLEM because she had PASSING PAPERS IN MY CLASSES. Now, I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I WAS WRITING THE CORRECT WAY, ESPECIALLY SINCE I COULDN'T PASS THE TEST.

Her discomfort increased because she had expected to work with her language arts professor rather than a stranger. She viewed the consultant as SOMEBODY WHO WAS GOING TO FIND OUT THAT I WASN'T A VERY GOOD WRITER and who WOULDN'T THINK I WAS VERY SMART. In terms of writing activies, her text focus was general, to write a descriptive and persusaive essay, in effect to pass the competency test.

EVENTS

In contrast to her expectations, Evelyn found the conference events to be confidence builders. The consultant was very helpful and encouraging. SHE POINTED OUT THE CORRECT THINGS I DID and gave me IDEAS AND TIPS ON HOW TO GO ABOUT WRITING THE ESSAYS. The con-

sultant also planned with Evelyn specific tasks for following meetings. Through reading her text aloud, Evelyn was able to SEE WHAT I WAS DOING AND HOW TO IMPROVE IT. THAT WAS REALLY GOOD FOR ME. Her text focus included topic sentences, paragraphing, sentence structure, and overall clarity.

OUTCOMES

For Evelyn, the conference experiences were both encouraging and illuminating. I DIDN'T REALIZE THAT MY WRITING COULD BE REALLY IMPROVED. She used a comparison to more fully describe her reactions. IN GOING TO THE CENTER, I REALIZED THAT WRITING IS ANOTHER SKILL LIKE ICE SKATING. IF I CAN LEARN TO SKATE, I CAN LEARN TO WRITE BETTER... I LEARNED THAT GOING THERE. Evelyn planned to rewrite one essay and create a new one. After the interview, she had an additional 6 conferences. She was using three specific strategies in her writing: 1) spending more time to organize before writing; 2) re- reading her text aloud and focusing on meaning; 3) pretending to be someone else reading her text. In terms of text changes, she realized that I COULD GET THE POINT ACROSS WITH LESS WRITING. IT'S NOT BETTER IF YOU WRITE MORE.

CLIENT 3 - TRACY

BACKGROUND

Tracy is a junior in university college, a division designed to meet the need of non-traditional students. Prior to her current course work, Tracy had been out of a formal educational setting for 20 years. She is majoring in psychology and is taking two courses: 19th Century American Literature and Expository Writing. She is a full time secretary receptionist for a doctor and was referred to

the center by her academic counselor. At the time of the interview, Tracy had completed 12 conferences.

EXPECTATIONS

Tracy had expected the conference to be a positive experience. She saw herself as a poor writer who had never had much help with writing. She felt that her teacher gave her ALWAYS CRTIICISM. ABOUT THIS ISN'T RIGHT, AND THAT'S NOT RIGHT. EVERY TIME I GET A PAPER BACK,I KNOW IT'S NOT GOING TO BE A GOOD RESPONSE. SO I HARDLY EVEN LIKE TO READ WHAT SHE SAYS. IF I COULD GET MORE POSITIVE COMMENTS FROM HER, THEN I WOULD KEEP WRITING. Tracy was very worried about beginning her paper. I FEEL I WON'T BE ABLE TO GET OUT ANY OF MY IDEAS. FIRST OF ALL I HAVE AN EMPTY FEELING IN MY STOMACH. I MEAN, I HATE TO WRITE.

Tracy hoped that the consultant would give her a STARTER and encourage her to keep at the difficult task of writing. Tracy's focus was to get the first part of her essay on paper because ONCE THAT STARTS, IT'S NOT SO BAD.

EVENTS

During the conferences, Tracy worked with 4 different consultants who helped her produce and develop ideas for her essays. Her text focus was on organization, staying on topic, and beginnings and endings.

OUTCOMES

Through her experiences in conferences, Tracy gained a confidence in her ability to write. I WAS ABLE. I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW MANY IDEAS I HAD OF MY OWN - YOU KNOW - TO WRITE DOWN. Writing became an easier process because I KNEW I WASN'T GOING TO BE ALL

BY MYSELF STRUGGLING WITH THESE PAPERS. She signed up for another writing course because I COULD RELY ON THE CLINIC FOR HELP. SO I HAD THE COURAGE TO TAKE THE WRITING COURSE, WHEREAS I WOULDN'T BEFORE. Perhaps even more important for Tracy was her response to her first completed essay. I HAD A THRILLING FEELING .. LIKE I WAS IN SCHOOL, YOU KNOW A MEMBER OF THE SCHOOL OR A SCHOLAR BECAUSE I HAD ACTUALLY WRITTEN A PAPER. AND I WOULD NEVER FORGET THAT FEELING.

For Tracy, the consultants were people who were interested in her writing and had the patience to hear and discuss what she had written. As for her writing activities, she had developed two strategies: 1) she would read and discuss a rough draft with a reader, usually a consultant; 2) she was keeping a journal to write in daily. She felt her texts were better organized and had a better development of ideas. For Tracy, the conference experience GAVE ME SUCH A SENSE OF WORTH, THAT SOMEONE WAS THAT INTERESTED AND LISTENED SO CLOSELY TO WHAT I HAD WRITTEN.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the information from the questionnaires and the interviews, few of our clients view themselves as very good writers. Most describe themselves as below average. Some are anxious about the conference process. The majority have found the consultant to be interested, helpful, and encouraging. Most clients plan a series of conferences. Based on the interviews, clients have adopted the writing stgrategies modeled in their conferences. Clients feel that they are better writers. Their comments indicate that they are gaining a sense of ownership and

authority over their texts. As more information about client perceptions is acquired, we can use this knowledge to assist in training of writing center consultants.

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